NO PREP

The History of Labor Day

Strikes, Struggles, and Social Change

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

The History of Labor Day: Strikes, Struggles, and Social Change

From Strikes to Reform

Labor Day, first declared a national holiday in 1894, did not emerge from parades and barbecues alone. Its roots lie in a period of intense conflict between workers, employers, and government. By the late 1800s, America was transforming into an industrial powerhouse. Factories, railroads, and mines employed millions, yet conditions were brutal. A typical workday stretched 12–16 hours, six or even seven days a week. Wages were so low that entire families, including children, had to work just to survive. Child labor was common—children as young as eight spent their days hauling coal or working dangerous textile machines. Workers began to organize and protest. They wanted shorter hours, safer conditions, and fair wages. These demands

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The Haymarket Affair and the Eight-Hour Day

One of the earliest and most dramatic labor clashes was the Haymarket Affair of 1886. That year, workers across the nation launched strikes to demand an eight-hour workday. In Chicago, a city with a strong labor tradition, thousands marched and rallied. On May 4, a peaceful gathering in Haymarket Square turned chaotic when an unknown person threw a bomb at police officers. The explosion killed several officers and civilians, and police responded with gunfire, leaving more dead and injured. The aftermath shocked the nation. Eight anarchists, all labor activists, were

arrested and accused of conspiracy, though evidence against them was weak. Four were executed, becoming martyrs for the labor movement. To many Americans, the bombing confirmed fears of radicalism and unrest, but to workers, it symbolized the high cost of demanding basic rights. The Haymarket Affair left a lasting legacy: it propelled the eight-hour workday into national debate and inspired May Day (International Workers' Day) around the world. In the U.S., it deepened the sense that labor rights required recognition at the highest levels.

The Pullman Strike and the Birth of Labor Day

Just eight years later, another violent conflict forced the federal government to act. The Pullman Strike of 1894 began when workers at the Pullman Company near Chicago protested wage cuts without rent reductions in company-owned housing. The strike spread nationwide, halting railroad traffic and disrupting mail delivery. President Grover Cleveland faced enormous pressure. Railroads were vital to the economy, and when mail service stopped, the strike became a national crisis. Cleveland ordered federal troops to intervene. Violence erupted, leaving more than 20 workers dead. Public opinion split sharply—some blamed the strikers for lawlessness, while others condemned the government for siding with business. In an effort to calm tensions and acknowledge workers' importance, Cleveland signed a law declaring Labor Day a federal holiday. While symbolic, the move showed that the government could not ignore the growing power of organized labor. Labor Day became a yearly recognition of workers' contributions, even though the struggles for fair treatment were far from over.

Tragedy and Reform: The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire

The struggle for safer workplaces continued into the 20th century. On March 25, 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City became a turning point. The factory, crowded with young immigrant women, had locked exit doors to prevent theft and unauthorized breaks. When fire broke out, hundreds were trapped. Some jumped from ninth-floor windows to escape; others suffocated inside. 146 workers died in less than 20 minutes. The horror outraged the public. Journalists described the gruesome scenes, and thousands attended the funerals. For the first time, middle-class Americans saw workplace conditions as a social crisis, not just a labor issue. Reformers pushed for stricter fire codes, building regulations, and workplace safety laws, many of which were enacted in the following years. The Triangle fire

revealed that labor rights were also human rights. It helped shift public opinion, paving the way for greater government responsibility in protecting workers.

Toward National Reform

By the 1930s, the Great Depression further highlighted the struggles of workers. With mass unemployment and wage cuts, strikes surged again. The federal government responded with historic reforms under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Wagner Act of 1935 guaranteed workers the right to organize and bargain collectively, while the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) of 1938 created the federal minimum wage, banned most child labor, and introduced overtime pay. These reforms were the culmination of decades of activism, sacrifice, and bloodshed. Labor Day now carried a double meaning: it was both a celebration of workers' achievements and a reminder of the conflicts that made them possible.

Key Information: Table: Key Labor Conflicts and Outcomes

Event	Year	Worker Demand	Government Response	Outcome
Haymarket Affair	1886	Eight-hour workday	Police crackdown, trials	Sparked global labor solidarity
Pullman Strike	1894	Wage restoration, fair rent	Federal troops sent	Violence, 20+ deaths; Labor Day created
Triangle Shirtwaist Fire	1911	Safer working conditions	State investigations, new laws	Fire codes and safety reforms
Wagner Act	1935	Right to unionize	Federal protection	Union membership expanded
Fair Labor Standards Act	1938	Minimum wage, child labor ban	Federal legislation	National worker protections

Case Study Excerpt: A Worker's Speech, 1890

"We are not asking for charity, but for justice. We ask for fair hours so that men may see their families by daylight, for wages that allow bread on the table, and for safe machines that do not maim us. Is this too much to demand from a nation built on liberty? If our voices are ignored, then strikes become our only tool. And if strikes bring violence, then let it be known: the responsibility lies not with the workers, but with those who refuse to treat us as human beings."

1. According to the speech, why did workers feel justified in striking?

2. How does this excerpt show the connection between labor activism and democratic values?

Multiple Choice

1. Which event led directly to the creation of Labor Day as a federal holiday?
    a) Triangle Shirtwaist Fire
    b) Haymarket Affair
    c) Wagner Act
    d) Pullman Strike

2. What were workers primarily demanding during the Haymarket Affair?
    a) Higher wages and pensions
    b) Safer factories
    c) An eight-hour workday
    d) End to child labor

3. What was one major result of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire?

a) Labor unions were banned

b) New fire and workplace safety codes were passed

c) Minimum wage laws were repealed in New York State

d) Federal troops broke up strikes

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Haymarket Affair	A) Set minimum wage and banned child labor
2. ___ Pullman Strike	B) Eight-hour workday rally turned violent
3. ___ Triangle Shirtwaist Fire	C) Protected workers' right to unionize
4. ___ Wagner Act	D) Safer working conditions after tragedy
5. ___ Fair Labor Standards Act	E) Federal troops sent to end strike

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The _____ Strike of 1894 turned violent when federal troops intervened.

2. The _____ Fire of 1911 killed 146 workers and pushed new safety laws.

3. The _____ Act of 1938 created the minimum wage and banned child labor.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why did many Americans see labor unions as necessary in the late 1800s?

2. How did violent strikes like Pullman influence government policy?

3. Why is Labor Day considered both a holiday and a symbol of sacrifice?